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Colonialism, Christianity, and the Making of Modern Education in Northeast India

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Abstract

This paper, titled "Colonialism, Christianity, and the Making of Modern Education in Northeast India," examines the evolution of education as a tool of colonial governance, cultural transformation, and religious proselytization in the northeastern frontier of British India. It traces the trajectory of educational development from the precolonial period – marked by indigenous learning systems, including institutionalised Sanskritic education in the plains of Assam and informal, community-based instruction in the hill regions – to the nineteenth century, when Western missionaries and colonial authorities reshaped the educational landscape.

The advent of Christianity following the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826) marked a turning point. Missionaries, particularly American Baptists and Welsh Presbyterians, established schools that not only promoted literacy but also facilitated evangelism, translating tribal dialects into written languages and creating educational networks deeply intertwined with Christian doctrine. These initiatives, supported and strategically utilised by the British administration, aimed less at knowledge dissemination and more at cultural assimilation, producing a service class aligned with colonial interests.

A focused case study on Nagaland illustrates how missionary education profoundly altered indigenous society. The introduction of literacy, Western curricula, and English as a lingua franca fostered a new collective identity while simultaneously displacing traditional practices, belief systems, and modes of knowledge transmission.

The study argues that modern education in Northeast India was not merely an educational enterprise but a complex colonial project involving collaboration between the British state, Christian missions, and local societies – each pursuing distinct objectives. Ultimately, education and Christianity functioned as mutually reinforcing forces that redefined the region's socio-cultural fabric.

Keywords: *northeast India, naga hills, pathshalas, proselytization, educationization*

1. Introduction

Politically, in accordance with contemporary usage, Northeast India comprises eight states: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. It is home to over 400 scheduled tribes, who constitute 80% of the population of Northeast India (Sitlhou, 2009).

The subcontinent is bordered in the south and southwest by Bangladesh, in the east and southeast by Myanmar, and in the north by China, Tibet, and Bhutan (Pachuau, 1998). According to Subhir Bhaumik (1998: 310), the term "Northeast" in India evolved from the concept of the "Northeastern Frontier," a colonial construct. It emerged during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century as part of the colonial project of ruling India.

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According to N.B. Biswas (2008: 7), formal or institutional education in most parts of Northeast India has a colonial origin, as educational institutions in this region were established during British colonial rule. In the two valleys of Assam – the Brahmaputra and the Barak – and in the plains of Tripura and Manipur, traditional institutions such as *tols* and *moktabs* imparted learning to only a small section of the population during the pre-colonial period. Mass education began in these areas during the colonial period, although British educational policy in India primarily aimed at creating a literate workforce to serve in subordinate administrative roles.

In the hill areas, progress in education was led by Western missionaries, who, in addition to teaching reading and writing, emphasized training in practical arts and crafts. Proselytization was their primary objective; nevertheless, their most significant contribution was converting tribal dialects into written languages and preparing primers for schools. In this context, the rapid progress of education in the hill areas of Northeast India since the nineteenth century can be considered remarkable. Development accelerated even further in the post-independence period (Biswas, 2008: 7).

1.1 Education in North-Eastern India Through the Ages

Biswas, in his work *Education in Northeast India*, elaborates on the history of education in the region. He states that historical and constitutional documents reveal that the entire region was associated with Assam, except for Manipur, Tripura, and Sikkim. There is ample evidence to suggest that the region had connections with the subcontinent during the prehistoric period. A historical overview shows that during ancient and medieval times, the indigenous system of education in Assam was similar, though not identical, to that in the rest of India. Biswas asserts that the pan-Indian system of education, including that of Northeast India, in ancient times was mainly Indo-Aryan and Sanskrit-oriented. Moreover, non-Aryan indigenous populations living in the region prior to the arrival of the *Aryans* also had their own indigenous education systems. Presumably, formal education, aside from hereditary professional learning, was first introduced by the *Aryans* who migrated to *Pragjyotisha* (Kamarupa) around the beginning of the Christian Era (Biswas, 2008: 21).

Formal or institutional education in various branches of learning was generally imparted in *tols*, *catuspathis*, and *pathshalas* by gurus or *adhyapakas* in pre-colonial and medieval Assam. Education in crafts and arts was transmitted either through hereditary lines or professional guilds (*khels*), which usually settled in the same locality, though there was no formal curriculum. Education in *tols* and *pathshalas* was not widespread and mainly served the upper strata of society. While there is no evidence that students from other castes were barred from admission, their numbers were extremely limited. Education for women existed, as revealed by medieval *carit puthis* and biographical works (Biswas, 2008: 23).

The Gurukul system, a traditional form of education in ancient India, involved students living with their teacher (guru) in a residential setting, where learning was imparted through close guidance and practical experience rather than formal classrooms. In Assam, this system was also followed. No tuition fees were charged, and students sat on the ground on mats made of *kusa* grass or reeds. Pupils did not strictly follow all prescriptions of the *Dharmashastras*. The monitorial system of teaching was in vogue, and students were called *oja-chatra*. Some residents of Assam travelled outside the region, for instance to Bengal, for higher education. Traditional knowledge in arts, crafts, medicine, architecture, and disease treatment was generally taught on a hereditary basis.

The *satra* institutions and their village wings, *namghars*, served as media for mass education. During the late medieval period, Vaishnavite *satras* were patronized by kings to maintain schools for the sons of disciples and devotees. Monastic and semi-monastic *tols* were similarly maintained (Biswas, 2008: 23).

Subjects taught in Assam included Sanskrit language, literature, grammar and lexicon, *Smriti*, *Dharmashastra*, *Vedanta*, *Mimansa*, *Nyaya*, astrology, astronomy, and arithmetic. Music, dance, instruments, and various schools of art and architecture were also part of the curriculum. Education was patronized by kings and maintained through voluntary efforts. Some writings were inscribed on stone slabs or copper plates to ensure permanence, while the usual writing material was *sachipat* (bark of the agara tree, Aquilaria

agallocha) (Biswas, 2008: 24). As palm trees did not grow in Assam, palm leaves were not used. *Tulapat*, or country-made paper from pressed cotton pulp, was also used, though less durable than *sachipat*. These features indicate that pre-colonial education in Assam was deeply rooted in indigenous traditions while strongly influenced by Indo-Aryan and Sanskrit learning.

In the hilly regions, such as Nagaland, informal education predominated. Learning occurred primarily through interactions between children and parents within the family and workplace. As children grew, they were attached to local dormitories, where they received much of the education and training needed for adult life. These dormitories, sanctioned by the local community, served as important institutions for the intellectual and emotional development of youth. They remained active until the arrival of missionaries, who introduced a modern formal system of education in the region (Saika, 1973). He then says that formal or institutional education in different branches of learning was generally imparted in *tols, catuspathis* and *pathshalas* by gurus or *adhyapakas* in pre-colonial or medieval Assam. Education in crafts and arts were either transmitted on hereditary lines or acquired through the medium of professional guilds or *Khels*, members of which usually settled in the same locality but it had no formal curriculum. The formal education imparted in *tols* and *pathshalas* was not widespread as to cover all section of the population. It was mainly confined to the upper strata of the society. There is no evidence on record that the students belonging to other castes were debarred from admission to schools, but their number was extremely limited. Education of women was also there as it is revealed from medieval *carit puthis* or biographical works (Biswas, 2008: 23).

He further mentions how the *Gurukul system* was followed in Assam. No tuition fee was charged. Students used to sit on the ground over which mats of *Kusa* grass or reeds were spread. All the prescriptions of *Dharmashastras* were not followed in toto by pupils of the medieval period. *Monitorial system* of teaching was in vogue during this period. Such students were called *oja-chatra*. Of course, the people of Asam used to go outside Assam, to Bengal for instance, for higher learning. Traditional indigenous knowledge in art and craft, science of medicine, treatment of diseases, architecture was taught and practiced generally on hereditary line. He also mentions about the *satra* institution and its village wing *namgharv* served as media of mass education. During the late medieval period the *Vaisnavite satras* were patronized by Kings for maintaining schools for teaching boys of the disciples and devotees of the Vaishnavite system. The monastic, semi monastic tols etc. were maintained (Biswas, 2008: 23).

Biswas mentions about the various subjects that were taught in Assam - Sanskrit language, literature, grammar and lexicon, *Smriti, Dharmashastra, Vedanta, Mimansa, Nyaya*, astrology, astronomy, arithmetic, etc. Music, dance and musical instruments and various schools of art, architecture designs were learned and practiced by the people. The education was patronized and maintained by the Kings as well as by the voluntary effort of the people. It is reported that some writings were incised in stone slabs and others in copper plates so as to make them permanent. But the usual material on which writing was done was *sachipat*, i.e. bark of agara tree or *aquilaria agallocha* (Biswas, 2008: 24). As palm trees do not grow in Assam, palm leaves were not used. *Tulapat* or country made paper made by pressing cotton pulp was also for writing or coping manuscripts, but such manuscripts are less durable than those written on sachipat (Biswas, 2008: 24). Thus, it is evident that the education which was prevailing in Pre-Colonial Assam was indigenous and has an Indo-Aryan and Sanskrit origins.

In case of the hilly regions, Nagaland for instance, informal education was in existence that took place mostly through interaction between children and parents in the family and work place in case of the young. As children grew into adolescence they were attached to local dormitories where they received much of the education and training needed in adult life. These dormitories have been powerful institutions with sanction from the local community and served an important educational function as agencies to impart education for the intellectual and emotional development of youth in the community. They remained active till the advent of the missionaries into region, who initiated the introduction of modern formal system of education in the whole region (Saika, 1973).

1.2 Missionaries & Christianity – Genesis of Modern Education in Northeast India

The introduction of Christianity in Northeast India can be marked by the *Treaty of Yandaboo*, concluded at the end of the First Anglo-Burmese War between the British East India Company and the kingdom of Burma on 24 February 1826 (Downs, 1992:6). According to Biswas (2008: 24-25), the work of various Christian missionaries in the Northeastern region is well documented. Among the first missionary groups to arrive were the American Baptist Mission, the Dutch Baptists, other Presbyterian groups, and the Roman Catholics. They ventured into the interior regions, where people worshipped natural forces as gods and where superstition held strong sway. In many areas, the initial missionary groups faced hostility from locals and required considerable time to gain acceptance and propagate their religion.

This was followed by a period of fruitful interaction between missionary groups and local communities, benefiting both parties. Formal schools were established in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and other hilly regions. The dialects of different tribes were systematically developed into written languages, including Khasi, Garo, Bodo, Mizo, and others. The first printing press and newspaper in the region were also initiated by missionaries. Christianity gradually became a major religion in the hill states, serving as a powerful unifying force.

Biswas notes that non-Christian missionary groups, such as the Ramakrishna Mission and Vivekananda Society, also contributed to the educational upliftment of the region, actively working among various tribes of Arunachal Pradesh (Biswas, 2008: 24-25).

Hoineilhing Sitlhou (2009), in her discourse on colonial education, draws parallels between education and evangelism. She notes that in the nineteenth century, the Serampore Baptists showed interest in Northeast India. The American Baptist and Welsh Presbyterian missions, continuing the work of the Serampore mission at Cherrapunji, were the primary Christian missions in the region throughout the nineteenth century (Downs, 1994: 65). Establishing schools was a principal means by which missionaries introduced Christianity. In addition to preaching and translation, Protestant missionaries often emphasized the Bible as the ultimate authority, making literacy essential for proper worship. Thus, education and evangelism were closely interlinked, with the former forming the basis for *preparatio evangelica* (Visvanathan, 1993).

In the Northeastern context, central station schools, where students from different villages and tribes studied together, significantly contributed to the development of new tribal polity and identity. Christian missionaries played a central role because, in many hill regions, the British government delegated almost complete responsibility for education to them, providing an influence far beyond ordinary circumstances, especially in the early days when missionary numbers were small. Under government patronage, missions established networks of schools throughout tribal areas. In most villages, a school preceded the establishment of a church. While some government schools existed in major centres, the responsibility for education in the tribal areas of present-day Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram remained with the missions for many years (Sithlhou, 2009).

Dr. J. Anikuzhikattil SDB (2010), in his essay *Contribution of Christian Institutions to Education in the Northeast Region of India,* concludes that *"the introduction of Christian education into the Northeast, precisely at the time when changes were taking place, would be regarded as a historical accident…the qualitative change that distinguishes them from the rest of society is definitely the work of the education they have received…"*

2. Nagaland – A Case Study

The state of Nagaland is inhabited by the *Nagas,* a group of people living mostly in the mountainous terrains of what was called the Naga Hills during the British colonial period. According to Tezenlo Thong (2016: 52-53), the Nagas were subjected to Westernization and subsequently to *"educationization",* i.e., the introduction of literacy and a Western-style education system, which transformed the previously non-literate (oral) Naga culture. When American missionaries first arrived in the Naga Hills in the 1840s to introduce literacy and

Christianity, the Nagas initially responded with indifference or aversion. However, this attitude gradually shifted as they recognized the social and economic advantages that accompanied literacy and Christianity within the emerging sociocultural paradigm. Consequently, the introduction of education by missionaries was poised to permanently transform the traditional way of life of the Nagas (Thong, 2016: 52-53).

2.1 Proselytization – The Civilizing Mission

The British sought to "civilize" the Naga Hills primarily for their own commercial interests. In the words of Dolly Kikon (2006: 139): *"The mission to civilize the 'savage' Naga head-hunters inhabiting the Northeastern frontier of India was accidental. The primary concern for the British administration was centred on protecting their lucrative tea trade and oil explorations in the Brahmaputra valley."* In this context, the British administration invited Western missionaries to proselytize the Nagas and other inhabitants of Northeast India. Consequently, mission organizations of various Christian denominations from Europe and the USA converged on the region (Thong, 2016: 52-53).

The discovery of tea plants by British explorers in the 1820s (Ukers, 1935: 162) and the subsequent establishment of massive tea plantations led to a land grab, which prompted retaliation by the Nagas. In response, the British undertook a series of military "expeditions" further into the Naga Hills, torching villages and displacing the inhabitants. Persistent Naga raids into the tea plantation settlements necessitated an all-out effort to pacify the "headhunters" and "civilize the savage tribes." Gradually, the hills were conquered and designated as the Naga Hills District under British administration. Several subdivisions were created to serve as headquarters for missionaries and British colonial representatives (Thong, 2016: 113-114). Kikon (2006: 139) mentions: *"The Naga Hills were declared Excluded Areas, which restricted the movements of both outsiders entering the hills and the Nagas leaving these enclosures. Such regulations cut off trade and communication with neighbouring communities. Instead, military barracks, educational institutions, and mission churches were established in Naga villages."*

While the British supplied the military forces necessary for the colonization of Northeast India, the white missionaries understood themselves as a force of light, dispelling the darkness among the native inhabitants. Largely, the British had no religious ambitions, but they supported the missionaries' efforts to evangelize the inhabitants, which in turn helped safeguard British commercial interests. Similarly, the missionaries had no commercial interests, but they welcomed British support for their mission endeavours. Thus, despite having completely different objectives, the two forces found common ground – civilizing the "savages" – and extended mutual support and cooperation (Thong, 2016: 114).

2.2 Indigenous Education System

Thong (2016: 53) notes that traditional Naga society had no formal system of education. As a non-literate society, education occurred primarily through oral transmission and experiential learning. It was functional and participatory, taking place within the home and community. The emphasis was on the formation of character rather than the acquisition of knowledge – that is, developing practical skills and moral values rather than imparting abstract theoretical knowledge. Intense argumentation or rationalization was uncommon, as such practices were viewed as self-promoting and incompatible with the harmonious existence valued in a collectivist society.

Thong further explains that only knowledge relevant to fulfilling societal roles was taught. Traditional education was closely integrated with the socioeconomic, artistic, religious, and recreational life of the community. Every individual was trained to become a responsible member of the family and village by adhering to community rules, regulations, values, and social norms, which ensured cohesion and harmony. In contrast to Western education, traditional education aimed not at social change but at conformity. Beyond parents, a child was surrounded by close relatives who shared the responsibility for their upbringing. *The education of the child was a communal effort*, and any adult could reprimand or discipline a misbehaving

child, as each boy or girl was considered not only the child of their biological parents but also a child of the community.

2.3 Advent of Christianity and Education – Modern Educational System among the 'Nagas'

British military expeditions and missionary activities commenced almost simultaneously. Major Jenkins described the process, emphasizing that the tribes on the Assam frontier should be brought within the scope of missionary activities as early as possible, as the influence of individuals skilled in the languages of these tribes, devoting all their time and attention, could not fail to be useful both to the colonial administration and the missionaries (Kikon, 2006: 154). The first British military expedition to the Naga Hills took place in 1832; by 1836, the first group of Christian missionaries had arrived in the area. These missionaries were members of the American Baptist Mission, who reached *Sadiya* in 1836 to undertake missionary work in Assam (Downs, 1983: 33).

Regarding the history of the modern educational system among the Nagas, American missionaries were at the forefront of introducing Western education (Thong, 2006: 54). The first centre of Christian activity was established around 1876, one year after Rev. E. W. Clark arrived in the village of *Molungyinchen* in the Ao Naga area. Missionaries taught the Nagas to read the Bible and sing Western Christian hymns, marking the introduction of the first elements of Western education. Consequently, the missionaries introduced the Roman alphabet, which allowed the translation of the Bible and Western hymnbooks into various Naga languages, including during the latter part of the nineteenth century (Kikon, 2006: 144). The first Bible translation work among the Naga people was started in the Ao Naga language by American Baptist missionary Edward Winter Clark and his wife Mary Mead Clark. The first part of a scripture, the Gospel of Matthew, was translated into Ao language in 1883, and the entire New Testament was published in 1913, with the full Ao Bible following in 1964 (Puthenpurakal, 1984).

The first Christian converts among the Nagas became preachers in their respective villages. However, colonial writers like Elwin note that *the colonial missionaries with a moral burden to civilize the Naga people followed a culturally destructive policy and robbed them of the things that gave vitality to their lives* (Elwin, 1997: 62). In this context, the British government left education entirely in the hands of missionaries, providing no infrastructural support, as it would not yield profitable returns. Nevertheless, once missionary institutions were established in the Naga Hills, the British administration recognized the benefits of secular education in enabling Naga men to access jobs in the colonial market. By 1913-14, mission institutions were transferred to the colonial government. Yet, financial aid from the British government to these schools was granted only on the eve of their exit from India. The primary objective of introducing formal education was not to impart knowledge broadly but to initiate *cultural colonization*, producing mainly a service class of petty officials and clerks to operate the colonial system (Kikon, 2006: 144–145).

Education and Christianity thus represented two sides of the same coin and acted as conduits for Westernization. Initially, education was intended merely to make the Nagas literate, serving the religious purpose of enabling Bible reading (West, 1997: 7). Only a few students deemed intelligent by missionaries were sent to Assam for higher education. Mission schools produced young Naga converts trained for religious positions as preachers and teachers. Their education and attachment to White people created a sense of alienation from their own communities and culture, leading them to perceive themselves as a distinct class with superior knowledge and achievement (Thong, 2016: 54).

The introduction of a Western-style educational system helped consolidate modern Naga identity (Kumar, 2005). English emerged as the lingua franca amid the multitude of Naga languages. Literacy and a common language enabled students from various tribes to study together, especially at higher levels, bridging linguistic barriers and fostering communication, friendship, and intertribal interactions. Church activities, such as preaching in English interpreted into vernacular languages, further enhanced intertribal connections. These increased interactions, unprecedented in the region's history, fostered a sense of closeness and gradually solidified a collective Naga identity (Thong, 2016: 88).

Conclusion

The concept of modern education is a colonial-cum-Westernized phenomenon which, although initiated by the British administration, was largely carried out by missionaries from Europe and the USA. In the early 19th century, Northeast India experienced colonization, followed by westernization, proselytization, and educationization of its inhabitants by Christian missionaries. Proselytization and educationization were integral and inseparable, highlighting the central role of missionaries.

The core argument here concerns the very nature of colonial education. Initially, it was not intended for imparting knowledge but for cultural colonization. Unlike mainland India, the Northeast – especially its hilly regions – saw little or no secular education until the twentieth century, when the British administration took over missionary educational institutions. This education was highly Westernized, based on Christian doctrines, and prioritized conversion over literacy, making literacy a key tool of proselytization. This phenomenon was a joint enterprise between the British administration, Christian missionaries, and the local inhabitants, each pursuing their own, often "selfish," interests. Accordingly, the roles of these agents at different junctures are discussed in the study. The role and work of missionaries, however, remain the crux of the process and cannot be overlooked.

In the case of Nagaland, as Thong notes, "*the process of colonization and proselytization gradually, but indisputably, transformed the Nagas and their culture."* The imposition of new ways of life, reflecting Western ideas, values, and practices, gradually replaced long-evolved Naga traditions. Consequently, many pre-contact practices are now viewed by the present generation as outdated or regressive, contributing to the rapid decline of ancestral Naga cultural values and practices.

Lastly, it must be acknowledged that this paper has its limitations. The educational history of Northeast India diverges markedly from that of mainland India and remains an underexplored field, with few comprehensive studies currently available. In light of this, the present work offers a preliminary framework based on the accessible sources.

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